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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: INTEGRATION PLAN WOULD RAISE GERMAN LANGUAGE
REQUIREMENTS FOR IMMIGRANTS

REF: VIENNA 1577

¶1. (U) Summary: Interior Minister Fekter, of the conservative People's Party (OVP), on December 15 officially released a summary of a national integration plan primarily designed to strengthen German language requirements for immigrants. Fekter said the plan would be submitted for cabinet approval the following week. However, leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SPO, the OVP's senior coalition partner), say the plan still lacks details regarding financing and implementation. End Summary.

Stricter Language Requirements

¶2. (U) Fekter's announcement followed eight months of meetings with GOA officials, representatives from the provinces, and NGOs to discuss measures to improve integration. The integration plan is focused on measures designed to enforce stricter German language requirements for immigrants. Legal residents in Austria are currently required to take 300 hours of German language lessons per year. Fekter's plan would double this to 600 hours per year. Moreover, the plan would require immigrant visa applicants to pass a German test in order to qualify for a visa. The test would be required even for applicants seeking to join family members in Austria ("family reunification.") Fekter maintained in her announcement that these measures would help immigrants compete in the labor market.

¶3. (U) The issue of German language proficiency has emerged as a major element of the integration debate in Austria, particularly regarding the Turkish community. A recent study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (reftel) indicated that only 53 percent of Austrian Turks are fluent in German, the lowest percentage recorded among the six EU countries with large Turkish populations.

Other Measures

¶4. (U) The plan also stipulates that child support payments for children up to age 18 be paid only on the condition that children are attending school or an apprenticeship program. Fekter has maintained that this measure will ensure that more young women, particularly in the Turkish community, receive the education and training they need to find employment. According to labor market figures, one third of Turkish girls stay at home after turning 16, without receiving any further education or securing employment.

¶5. (U) The action plan also calls for reforming religious instruction in schools and for recruiting more immigrants for public service positions. The Interior Ministry, however, does not have jurisdiction on these matters. Under the plan, an Integration Office would be established in the Interior Ministry to monitor implementation.

SPO Calls Plan "Premature"

¶6. (U) The plan drew immediate criticism from SPO leaders, particularly Defense Minister Darabos, who is developing his own integration plan on behalf of his party. Darabos argued that Fekter's announcement was "premature" because the details regarding financing and implementation have not been worked out. Darabos maintained, for example, that the SPO could support language tests for immigrant visa applicants, but noted that Fekter's plan leaves open the question of how the tests would be administered. SPO leaders have said further discussion is needed before the plan can be approved by the cabinet.

¶7. (U) The plan promises immigrants easier access to the labor market, in exchange for meeting the higher language requirements. However, even some of Fekter's OVP colleagues, including Economics Minister Mitterlehner, have noted that the plan does not spell out how this will be accomplished.

Comment: A Rushed Announcement

¶8. (SBU) Fekter appears to have rushed to announce her plan in an attempt to demonstrate that she is the leading GOA figure on integration. The plan has not been coordinated with all the elements of the GOA that would be responsible for implementing it. Nor has it been endorsed by the SPO. None of the details regarding financing and implementation have been hammered out.